
A Dialogue on Youth and Democracy

by Amanda Clarke

Voter turnout among the general population in Canadian federal elections has declined over the past twenty years. This problem is particularly acute among young people. Recognizing the need to more effectively address this issue at the federal level, several federal entities responsible for youth programmes including the Department of Canadian Heritage, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Department of Justice, Elections Canada, the Governor General's Office, the Library of Parliament, and the National Capital Commission, began discussing opportunities for greater collaboration on the topic of youth civic and democratic engagement. On September 25, 2009 the Library of Parliament invited leading figures from these federal entities, and from the private and nongovernmental sectors to participate in a day-long session on the topic of youth civic and democratic participation. This article looks at some of the themes that emerged from the workshop as well as the recommendations.

To be sure, discussions at this forum did not result in a definitive analysis of the issue of youth civic and democratic engagement. Indeed, a number of participants expressed conflicting points of view, and many conversations ended with the conclusion that the topic is far too complex to be understood without further research, and certainly not in a single day of moderated discussions. Nevertheless the Dialogue Session served as a window into the current Canadian approach to this topic, inasmuch as it revealed how Canada's leaders in this field define the problem, and how they believe that it can be addressed.¹

The Trends

When asked which trends characterise youth civic and democratic engagement in Canada, participants focused primarily on four themes. First, while young people are less likely than previous generations to engage with formal political institutions and processes by, for example, voting in a federal election or joining a political party, youth are by no means disengaged

from their communities. Youth are active participants in non-traditional political activities, such as social justice and environmental organizations, international development projects, and online petitions and fora. At the same time, young people often do not understand how these activities might be brought to bear on the policy processes led by legislators and governments. Some participants suggested that non-traditional engagement may lead to traditional forms of engagement. Others suggested that youth direct their limited time and political capital to venues that they feel are most relevant to their needs and interests, and most likely to be receptive to their input.

In addition, participants suggested that the current generation of young people do not face the same set of options and expectations as did previous generations. Life transitions, such as completing school, getting married, or starting a family, are all happening later in life, as individuals lengthen the time between completing education and settling into a stable career and family situation. As a result, conclusions about earlier cohorts of young people should not necessarily shape programmes and policies directed at today's youth. Similarly, participants discussed the need for youth engagement efforts to address the growing demographic of young singles and young couples

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Dialogue on Democracy Participants

Janice Astbury	Senior Program Officer, J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
Robert Barnard	Founder of DECODE, Co-author of <i>Chips & Pop: Decoding the Nexus Generation</i>
André Blais	Professor, Université de Montréal
Dianne Brydon	Director General, Learning and Access Services, Library of Parliament
Marc Chalifoux	Executive Vice-President, The Historica-Dominion Institute
Pierre Desmartheaux	Assiral Counsel and Director General, Youth Justice, Strategic Initiatives and Law Reform, Justice Canada
Ilona Dougherty	Executive Director, Apathy is Boring
Léo Duguay	President, Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians
Tracey-Lee Eddy	Central Canada Youth Coordinator, Experiences Program, Equal Voice
Amanda Grainger	Civic Footprint Online Organizer, Framework Foundation
Sylvain Groulx	Director General, La Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française
Taylor Gunn	Chief Election Officer, Student Vote
Kelly Jones	Camp Coordinator in Niagara District, YMCA
Samir Khan	Strategist, DECODE
Dr. Mark Kristmanson	Director, Public Programming, National Capital Commission
Catherine Latimer	General Counsel and Director General, Youth Justice, Strategic Initiatives and Law Reform, Justice Canada
Francis LeBlanc	President, Educational Foundation, Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians
Michel Lemay	Director General, Office of the Director General, Citizen Participation, Canadian Heritage
Christine Macintyre	Director, Events and Visitor Services, Office of the Secretary to the Governor General
Benoit Morin	Director, Public Education Programs, Learning and Access Services, Library of Parliament
Kevin Millsip	Executive Director, Next Up (Vancouver),
Akela Peoples	Co-Founder, President and CEO, Youth in Motion, Top 20 Under 20™
Susan Torosian	Director, Outreach Program and Stakeholder Engagement, Elections Canada
Lacey Whiteduck	Student Program, Aboriginal Healing Foundation
Sandra Zagon	Senior Associate, Ascentum, Board Member, Canadian Community for Dialogue and Deliberation (C2D2)

Editor's note: Certain participants may have changed posts since the Dialogue Session took place in September. For the most up to date information on participants' titles and organisations contact the author at the Library of Parliament (clarka@parl.gc.ca).

under the age of thirty who do not yet have children, and who focus primarily on career building. Studies demonstrate that this group, which currently comprises 10% of the Canadian population, is the least civically and democratically engaged compared to students, families with children at home and mature singles and couples. Since the bulk of youth engagement strategies focus on students specifically, this highly disengaged group is under-researched and inadequately addressed by existing strategies that equate the term "youth" with "student", a characterisation that is increasingly outdated.

As much as non-student youth deserve an important place in discussions of youth civic and democratic engagement, participants also emphasised the need to address troubling trends in civics education programmes. Participants suggested that curriculum and methods of delivery have not evolved to meet students' needs, and that teachers do not always receive sufficient training in the subject. In turn, teachers and students are generally disinterested in civics education. Interestingly, participants also suggested that school curriculums generally reinforce the importance of volunteering, donating, and other forms of non-traditional engagement, without

necessarily emphasising the importance of engaging with formal political institutions and processes.

The last trend explored was the relatively recent surge in interest in digital engagement strategies. While youth leaders and researchers assumed that online engagement would lead to greater participation by youth in formal democratic processes, this does not appear to have been the case. In addition, evidence suggests that the same types of youth that are engaged in politics in the offline world take advantage of online opportunities for civic and democratic participation. As such, most participants agreed that while digital strategies do not exacerbate the problem of disengaged youth, they do not appear to inspire participation amongst those that are already hardest to reach through youth-focused programmes. Instead of treating new digital technologies as a panacea for youth disengagement, participants suggested that such technologies be viewed as one tool amongst many that may be used to engage and inform young people.

The Challenges

Having discussed these trends, participants next considered the main challenges they face as individuals working to address the issue of youth civic

and democratic engagement. It became increasingly clear as the discussion developed that one of the major barriers to remedying low levels of youth engagement is our inability to make firm conclusions about youth themselves. Simply put, participants suggested that the problem of youth engagement cannot be fully understood, and in turn, remedied, without further research into young people's attitudes and behaviours. For example, many noted that we currently lack metrics tracking youth participation in non-traditional political activities. Because we are not able to measure these forms of engagement, much debate exists over the actual levels and quality of youth civic and democratic participation. Some argue that we are witnessing historic highs in youth engagement, while others suggest a net decline in engagement. Similarly, participants noted that any research on youth must reflect the fact that young Canadians have diverse needs and interests that are shaped by particular regional, linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic factors. It is difficult to understand this highly varied group, and to design programmes and strategies that are tailored to the individual needs of its members, when researchers presume that "youth" is a uniform category.

As much as participants stressed the need to develop a more complex understanding of youth, they also noted the importance of developing a greater understanding of the programmes and policies that address the issue of youth engagement in Canada. As a second major challenge, many participants suggested that a lack of communication between and among members of the federal, non-profit and private sectors stunts the Canadian approach to youth engagement.

Finally, participants spent a great deal of time discussing the communication challenges that complicate efforts to engage youth in the civic and democratic life of Canada. To be sure, participants noted that the problem of communication is not one of information supply, for in today's information age, resources on politics and government are abundant. Rather, the problem is one of dissemination. Existing communication channels do not necessarily reach all youth in an effective way. In addition, some participants claimed that parents do not always serve as good role models of civic and democratic engagement, and that many deliver negative messages about politics and the democratic process to their children. This perception is at odds with programmes encouraging young people to become more politically active, leading to mixed messages that add a further challenge to programmes already struggling to effectively reach young people.

Participants also suggested that political leaders often do not communicate in ways that youth find engaging. Political speeches, debates and press releases are often viewed as "boring" and "out of touch" by young people. Similarly, participants noted that democratic institutions, such as Parliament, might more effectively demonstrate their relevance by targeting the specific concerns and values of young people in their communication strategies.

Likewise, participants noted that the media also fail to effectively target youth. As a result, young people do not always find a voice to which they can relate in the national political dialogue hosted by mainstream media channels. This is largely because very few mainstream media figures actually come from the youth demographic.

Last, even though social media and other web-based tools have the potential to open up new modes of communication with young people, it is difficult to use these tools to reach youth in effective or meaningful ways. Increasingly, young people restrict their time on the Internet to user-defined social networking sites and direct messaging, behaviours that limit opportunities for those focused on youth civic and democratic engagement to access young people online. In addition, youth expect immediacy in their online communication. Often, the deliberation that goes into online messaging by these agencies makes it difficult or impossible to meet this expectation. In turn, these efforts may add to youth's negative perceptions of political institutions.

Recommendations

Laying out these trends and challenges prepared the participants to discuss ways of improving the current approach to civic and democratic engagement by Canadian youth. A number of individuals suggested that one-on-one interactions between youth and current and former parliamentarians and elected officials, as well as highly engaged youth and adults, might be an effective means of encouraging disengaged youth to participate in the democratic process. Others focused on the school system, arguing that the time spent in primary and secondary school, as well as in college and university, represents a huge window of opportunity for those working to encourage youth participation in the democratic process. While certain schools are hosts to effective programming, these individuals argued that there are many ways in which this opportunity for engagement is under-explored. A number of participants noted that youth-focused programmes in schools might be improved by focusing less on the actors, institutions, and processes of parliamentary

democracy, and more on the significant influence that these actors, institutions and processes have on the everyday lives of young Canadians. Youth react positively to programmes that connect their interests and needs to civic and democratic engagement, a reality that is not reflected in many programmes currently being delivered to youth.

In addition, many argued that programmes would benefit from the creation of a core fund allocated for use by innovative youth engagement initiatives. To this end, certain participants pledged their commitment to work with federal agencies to identify sustained funding to encourage youth engagement in democracy.

All participants agreed that there are many unexplored opportunities for collaboration between and among members of the private, non-profit and public sector. Whether in terms of sharing research results, or when designing and implementing programmes, participants believed that they would benefit by co-ordinating efforts and building on each other's work. In particular, participants suggested that an inventory of activities offered by agencies focused on youth engagement might serve as a useful tool for identifying potential partnership opportunities. Such an inventory might also reveal gaps in programming and research that currently go unnoticed. Participants also identified the need for a champion that would coordinate future collaborative ventures focused on youth engagement. They suggested the Library of Parliament as an appropriate coordinating body, given its ties to Parliament and federal agencies, as well as its non-partisan mandate and focus on public education and engagement. For its part, the Library of Parliament disseminated a report summarising the main themes of the Dialogue Session, and committed to investigating how the recommendations discussed by participants might be moved ahead, in consultation with federal agencies and participants.

Conclusion

The Youth and Democracy Dialogue Session provided a unique opportunity for Canada's top thinkers in the area of youth engagement to exchange points of view and to suggest ways in which youth might become more active participants in Canadian democracy. Perhaps more significant, though, is the fact that this occasion brought together many individuals who prior to the Dialogue Session, were unaware of each other's specific activities and mandates, despite the similarity in each person's work in the area of youth engagement. While it is not clear at this stage whether closer collaboration between participants can be achieved, the Dialogue Session at least identified the

need for individuals and organisations in the federal, private, and non-profit sectors to investigate overlaps and gaps in programming that may suggest room for improvement in Canada's current strategy to youth engagement.

In addition to getting this conversation started, the Dialogue Session was a valuable exercise inasmuch as the discussions shared by participants provide a glimpse into the current approach to youth engagement in Canada. To be sure, the discussion itself, and the summary of its content provided in this article, should not be construed to represent a factual or comprehensive evaluation of the issue of youth engagement. Rather, the Dialogue Session instead served as an occasion to highlight how the problem of youth engagement is conceived by leaders in this field, and to outline what these leaders believe may be required for young people to become more active participants in the civic and democratic life of Canada. This need becomes even more urgent when one considers the policy issues dominating political discourse in Canada today. Climate change, the deficit, and pensions, to name just a few, are the subjects of today's big political questions. The answers provided to these questions will have long-lasting effects that young people will not escape. As long as youth are absent from the processes that shape contemporary policy choices, an aging generation of Canadians will continue to determine the fate of a future Canada that they will not inherit. Simply put, whether youth engage or not, today's politics are more theirs than ever, and it is time for our democratic processes and institutions to reflect this.

Notes

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1. Definitions of the term "youth" varied considerably amongst participants, depending on the nature of each individual's particular work on youth engagement. Accordingly, in this article, the term "youth" is used in a broad sense, to refer to young people between the ages of twelve and thirty.

Likewise, "youth engagement" can have many different meanings. At the Dialogue Session, participants emphasized "civic and democratic engagement". For the sake of simplicity, the term "civic and democratic engagement" in this article refers to participation in a broad range of activities that imply an awareness of and sense of duty to one's political community. This definition of engagement is particularly appropriate in the context of youth, as narrow, traditional understandings of engagement do not always reflect the unique ways in which young people exercise their citizenship.